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ABSTRACT

This paper raises important questions about proposals for empowerment and shared governance in U.S. schools. Holding that consent is the key to understanding power and empowerment, the paper defines these concepts, discusses the purposes of empowerment, describes the types of empowerment being attempted, and outlines some predictable consequences. According to French and Raven (1959), five types of power exist: legitimate, reward, coercive, expert, and referent (associated with charisma). The first three types of power are transferrable; the other two, which have the most influence in human transactions, are not. Power may also be enhanced by improving the degree of expert power possessed by certain individuals or groups in the organization through education programs. Redefining power and empowerment in terms of synergistic interactions forces educators to consider some new dimensions: (1) all empowerment attempts may be refused by the organization or individuals; and (2) empowerment effects are determined by an individual or organization's enhanced health. If the organization cannot function more efficiently or effectively than previously, empowerment attempts have failed. Examples of empowerment attempts that can prove deleterious to healthy schools are legislation of more teacher power, parental "choice" initiatives, and efforts to minimize the principal's power. Healthy schools exist not because of outside influences, but in spite of them. Recommendations for research and practice are provided. (50 references) (MLH)

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THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SOURCE OF POWER IN AN EDUCATIONAL SETTING

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THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SOURCE OF POWER IN AN EDUCATIONAL SETTING

by Eugene L. Golanda

> "Power does not corrupt men; fools, however, if they get into a position of power, corrupt power." George Bernard Shaw

The primary purpose of this paper is to raise important questions about proposals for empowerment and shared governance which are current buzzwords on the American educational scene today. The basic premise of this study holds that the key to understanding power and empowerment lie in the concept of consent; it is consent which holds power together, and consent which can alter or destroy it.

Four questions which are addressed in this paper regarding the current empowerment movement: 1. What is power and empowerment?; 2. What are the purposes of empowerment?; 3. What means for empowerment are being attempted?; and, 4. What are some predictable consequences?

What is Power and Empowerment?

Power is a complex entity. Many persons have died for it, because of it, and have killed for it. Some persons long for it while others fear it. It is important to continue trying to understand the idea of power because power is consistent with all that is valued in organized human life.

All people who live and work with others have faced personal and probably traumatic experiences with power and powerlessness, starting with the family. Nobody in our social world can escape such experiences. Therefore, power is a fundamental characteristic of human existence.

There are probably as many meanings for the term "power" as there are people who think about it. Power (empowerment), cannot be fully explained without appeal to other values, and the meanings of these values may or may not be consistent with a given meaning of power; and lastly, it is not possible to simultaneously incorporate all meanings of power.

> "---we find that the more important a word is, and the more central and necessary its meanings are in our pictures of ourselves and the world, the more ambiguous and possibly deceiving the word will be. Naturally these words are also those which have been most used in philosophy." (Richards, 1959, p.24)

Anyone reading the literature regarding power has to be extremely disappointed with the definitions and descriptions. Power has been variously defined (in an abbreviated form) as: "the capacity to ensure and to prevent outcomes"; "the ability to cause or prevent change"; "the production of intended effects"; "the capacity of an individual, or group of individuals, to modify the conduct of other individuals or groups in the manner which he desires."; "the capacity of a system-unit to attain goals, prevent undesired interference,

command respect, control possessions, etc."; "the process of affecting policies of others using severe deprivations for non-conformity"; "the ability to employ force,"; "if 'A' has power over 'B' we can substitute, 'A's behavior causes B's behavior.'"; and, lastly, "My intuitive idea of power, is this: A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do."

If there is such difficulty in defining and understanding the term "power", why then does it appear to be so simple for current advocates to discuss "empowerment"? When defining empowerment, one must look to the source of power.

> "To empower is to invest legally or formally with power or authority; to authorize or license; to impart or bestow power to an end or for a purpose; to gain power or assume power over." (Bolin, 1989, p.81)

According to Nyberg (1981), as long as there are at least two or more people and one plan of action, the minimum conditions for power are met. Power is thus part psychological and part social. It cannot be just one or the other. Organization and power are, therefore, conjugal concepts. They sleep and engage together: where there is organization, power exists; where there is power, organization exists. To the extent that organization is fundamental and inevitable in social life, it is likewise

true that power will be found. Since power is inherent in every social agreement, it may be measured by the extent to which it creates or inhibits change or further consequences.

In every organization of any size, certainly in schools, power always seems to be concentrated in an oligarchical manner. Such power arises from a combination of outside influence, personality characteristics and perceived knowledge and skills of the various group members, and through internal transactions and negotiations. However, power is always subject to consent. According to Nyberg (1981) there is a natural development of consent in an organization:

1. Acquiescence under threat of sanction;
2. compliance based on partial or slanted information;
3. indifference due to habit or apathy;
4. conformity to custom; and
5. Commitment through informed judgment.

Any discussion of power will inevitably lead to the subject of ethics. It is precisely because power has been so often utilized for unethical, illegal, or immoral purposes that it has assumed a poor definition and reputation among many. Traditionally, intellectuals have been wont to overtly assume the trappings and positions of power for these reasons. Certainly, this applies to teachers in general:

> "Consequently, faculty have typically adopted attitudes of contempt and hostility towards administration which, in their view, is not only

> impersonal, but seeks to depersonalize"
>
> Moreover, teachers generally tend to avoid involvement with administrative work, partially on the grounds that such labors are not consonant with their own role and phenomenological self-image as scholars. In effect, there is a distancing of the latter group from the former, sometimes through violent verbalization which suggests a genuine abhorrence and fear. After all, faculty who recoil from an association with power cannot be accused of being fellow travelers - attracted to it, involved in it, lusting after it, tainted by it. (Pam, 1988, p.138)

Power itself has no actual morals or ethics; it may be utilized as a means to an end or it may be viewed as an end product in itself, either purpose of which may be ethical or unethical, depending on the specific situation in question.

No description of power would be complete, without exploring the work of French and Raven (1959) in which they proposed that in all interpersonal situations, five types of power exist:

Legitimate Power is power which is assigned to persons dependent on their respective position in the hierarchy of the organization.

Reward Power is predicated upon the ability to provide rewards to others. Such power can be either formal or informal.

Coercive Power is determined by the ability of one person or group of people to punish another. Again, such power may be exercised either formally or informally.

Expert Power is that which is based upon knowledge or expertise recognized by another. Expert power is always earned.

Referent Power is closely associated with charisma. It is power based on association, closeness, and personality. Numerous historical figures have been endowed with referent power.

Three of the five types of power are transferable, or can be employed to empower, to some degree; two are not. Legitimate power, reward power, and coercive power may be employed for empowerment tactics; one cannot confer either expert power or referent power on others, unless one is directly involved in the organization, although through education all forms of power can be affected. Unfortunately, or fortunately, depending on one's perspective, it is the latter two forms of power which have the most influence in human transactions, in most situations.

What are the Purposes Behind Popular Empowerment Efforts?

Current discussions regarding empowerment for educational systems stretch the definitions to their limits. Actions are being proposed which intend to change the ways in

which schools traditionally operate. Empowerment proposals include enhancement of roles for teachers, other school staff, principals, and parents. Some proposals for empowerment involve the inclusion of private industry in the public school decision-making processes.

The ends to be achieved by the empowerment efforts follow certain predictable and somewhat repetitive themes. Empowerment will, according to different adherents: professionalize teaching; enhance the image of teachers; raise test scores; reduce the dropout rate; allow America to compete effectively with other governments; prepare young people more effectively for the economic world of tomorrow; promote more cooperation, dedication, commitment, and ownership for the objectives and outcomes of the organization; promote a more efficient organization; humanize the environment; promote the acquisition of new learnings and skills among employees; and promote trust and confidence in others in the workplace.

All of these purposes for empowerment may be construed by adherents as ethical and valuable; each may also be viewed by others as attempts for the promotion of ulterior motives. It is obvious that each purpose is not in agreement with any or all other purposes, and in many cases, the accomplishment of one purpose may come at the expense of another.

Strategies Used For Empowerment - What and Who?

As has already been mentioned, there are only four measures which might be employed to accomplish the aims of empowerment schemes, regardless of purpose: 1. Empowerment may be accomplished by increasing the amount of legitimate power which any individual or group possesses in an organization, including financial or economic discretion. 2. It may be obtained by increasing the amount of reward power available to these same individuals or groups. 3. Power may be enhanced by means of increasing the amount of coercive power which could be exercised. (Generally speaking, reward and coercive power diminish in intensity or effectiveness with use.) Power also **may be enhanced** by attempts to improve the degree of expert power possessed by certain individuals or groups in the organization through programs of education. But expert power is particularly subject to ratification by others. Each of these means are currently being attempted, singly or in combination, in numerous places throughout the country.

Who are those who are attempting to empower others? Legislators, judges, and government/school administrators at every level seem to be involved in this movement (almost anyone who believes s/he has influence). Certainly union leaders are at the forefront of this empowerment effort.

It's almost impossible to find anyone who is opposed to empowerment, which currently seems to be akin to apple pie and motherhood.

Many proposals for empowerment are blatant attempts to undermine the authority of the school principal. This is unfortunate, in my opinion, and unnecessary. There have been enough studies conducted which demonstrate the indispensable value of an effective principal leader in a school. Any investigation of organizational power reveals that authority always tends to be accumulated in the hands of a few individuals in an organization (Michels, 1949). Because of the very structure of schools, the principal is going to be one of those authority persons. This will be true regardless of the relative degrees and other types of power possessed by that individual.

If the elimination of this formal, legitimate, position were to actually occur, which has been forcefully argued by some, another or others in the organization would have to emerge to fill the various vital organizational roles that principals now perform. (And, these persons would have to restructure the roles they previously performed or take on additional responsibilities which might create disharmony, both personally and in the school.) These persons may be called by some other name in a restructured organization, but

"a rose is a rose".

> "Authority is simply power that is respectable or acceptable, to those who delegate it in the first place and who then consent to it."
> (Nyberg, 1981, p.89)

A New Definition of Power and Empowerment

In order to enhance the purposes of this inquiry, one additional definition for the words "power" and "empowerment" is offered. For the continued focus of this investigation:

> **Power** is the ability to accomplish something perceived as being valuable. From an organizational perspective, power is a synergistic entity, which enables a group to accomplish more than would have been possible through the accumulation of independent, individual contributions. The intensity, or health, of power may be measured by the time, energy, and resourcefulness required to accomplish it's intended purpose and overcome related obstacles.

> **Empowerment** is any contribution (conceptual, human or material), accepted by an individual or organization, which assists with the accomplishment of its intended purposes; efforts or means to empower are subject to acceptance or rejection by the individual or group involved; the effects of empowerment efforts may be measured by the extent to which they actually enhance the health or ability of the individual or the organization to accomplish its objectives.

The reasons for the formulation of new definition for **power** is embedded in the author's need to understand power in terms of an individual being, in addition to a group or

social sense (all previous definitions seem to discount the possibility than an individual might possess and exercise power when not functioning in a group situation). Also, the definitions for power in group situations previously offered did not appear to clarify the synergistic value which can occur in effective organizational settings. This definition attempts to correct these two oversights.

The new definition for **empowerment** also adds two important dimensions to previous definitions. 1. All attempts at empowerment may actually be refused by the organization or individuals; and, 2. Empowerment effects are determined by enhanced health of the individual or organization; if the organization cannot function more efficiently or effectively than previously, empowerment attempts have failed. Such attempts at empowerment may actually cause disfunction to occur in organizations which previously were functioning in a relatively healthy manner.

In terms of this definition then, in a social sense, one is **empowered** and possesses **power** when one is associated with a healthy, powerful organization. Since this definition and interpretation of the concept of power has incorporated the use of another word of ambiguous nature, **healthy,** the definition of that word is also vital to any understanding of the intended meaning of the original concept.

A prophet of yesteryear, Matthew Miles (1965), provided for us a description of a healthy school organization. He described a healthy school as one which exhibits reasonably clear and shared goals (goal focus), relatively distortion-free communication systems, in every direction and of every type (communications adequacy), equitable distribution of influence to all levels of the organization (optimal power equalization), and effective and efficient use of inputs, both human and material (resource utilization). He pointed out that the healthy school reflects mutually satisfying vectors of influence between the inhabitants and the organization (cohesiveness), a feeling of well-being among the people in the organization (morale) self-renewing properties (innovativeness), and an active response to its environment (autonomy and adaptation). Lastly, the healthy school, he explained, maintains and strengthens its abilities to solve its problems (problem solving adequacies).

Possible Adverse Effects From Empowerment Efforts

Without a doubt, thousands of our nations schools are healthy organizations today. They are likely to be found in every state in great numbers. The health of these organizations will naturally continue to be maintained and improved through the normal renewal processes which they

regularly undergo. Such renewal efforts will incorporate strategies such as staff development for individuals and groups, and also through improved use of available resources. These schools are already empowered and are powerful. Attempts by those outside the organization to further empower them must be considered carefully.

> "There is a danger that we may come to believe that we are no longer capable of acting out of our own purposes, that we are capable of acting only as agents for fulfilling the plans of others. This is a mindless state of obedient isolation where responsibility has only technical but no social meaning, and where conscience is as rare as curiosity." (Nyberg, 1981, p.79)

The additional imposition of empowerment strategies such as legislating more authoritative teacher power may have an adverse effect on the transactions and negotiations that are already functioning very well in these healthy schools. Attempts to provide parents more "choice" may well be instrumental in destroying otherwise effective and healthy schools through enlargement of school populations or by changing their composition too regularly. Attempts to minimize the power of principals may work to the disadvantage of schools which are in the act of becoming healthy under the leadership of effective principals.

A principal has certain delegated powers which are not often an issue in the school, but whether this legitimate

power should be further enhanced is another question. Power which is respected by those subject to it becomes authority precisely by virtue of that judgment. Teachers and other school personnel make that judgment by supporting or showing non-support for the principal in various ways.

In every school situation, the judgment of teachers and other school employees, of parents and students, singly and collectively, to support or not to show support for the principal and other school leaders and their decisions is subject to constant change and interplay. The organized withdrawal of consent is the power over power which exists in every school, just as in all other types of organizations.

> "When we understand power as an aspect of any social transaction that involves delegation, consent, and effect, we see that the key to long-term success lies in the informal goodwill of the consenter. As consent approaches complete willingness, based on informed judgment and invigorated by a personal motivation to accomplish the plan in question, then delegation and consent mingle into a sort of mutual cooperation that requires no vigilance, coercion, or force. Since all of the collective resources available through the relationship can be applied directly to accomplishing the plan, this form of power is highly efficient." (Nyberg, 1981, pp. 81-82.)

The ultimate source of empowerment for schools can be found within the school environment itself. It is here that the real needs of the organization can be discovered; it is here where the real solutions to those needs may be explored.

It is highly unlikely that mandated proposals aimed at uncertain targets will prove effective for the vast majority of schools. It is far more likely that the defense mechanisms inherent in schools will overcome many of the efforts of these "fools" with power to influence. However, it is also likely that many schools, both effective and ineffective would fall prey to these efforts at reform, regardless of intent.

Conclusions

To the extent that unhealthy schools exist, this condition has occurred largely because of the support structure surrounding them. Healthy schools have acquired their fortunate state of being, not because of the outside influences in most instances, but in spite of them; in spite of the oppressive bureaucracy, in spite of the unions, in spite of the school boards, in spite of the state departments of education, in spite of legislative interferences, in spite of poor structural and financial support, in spite of well-intentioned theorists, in spite of poor parent and community support and attitudes, in spite of changing societal values, and in spite of conditions that would have caused most private businesses to file for relief under Chapter 11.

And thank goodness, I expect that these healthy schools

will continue to persist in their efforts to get better at what they do, in spite of the latest "outside" attempts to **improve** them! If "do-gooders" really want to help improve schools generally, with their broad brush strokes, it would be most beneficial if they set about to improve those environmental conditions which have forced schools to creatively endure. Certainly, they could begin by providing our schools reasonable financial assistance, without unnecessary restrictions, and without these resources having to go through the normal bureaucratic layers.

Recommendations for Further Research

Following are topics in which effective quantitive and qualitative research might be helpful in efforts for school improvements:

1. How have healthy organizations achieved this state of being?
2. How do they maintain this state?
3. What circumstances lead to the demise of healthy organizations?
4. What intervention strategies are effective in assisting schools and school personnel become healthy?
5. What means are available to evaluate the health of organizations which might prove useful to schools?
6. What are the optimal sizes for healthy schools?

Recommendations for Practice

The following recommendations are offered to those persons directly involved in improving schools:

1. If your school is healthy, keep up the efforts to maintain this state; eternal vigilance is the price of health.

2. If your school is not healthy, but in a state of becoming, do healthy activities, obtain and maintain healthy attitudes, and keep trying, for perseverance will pay dividends.

3. If your school is unhealthy, create a new school or close the one you're in.

4. Be wary of strangers bearing gifts!

5. For university faculty - if you can't help with the problems, don't make them worse; stay away if you are going to be part of the problem.

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